Civil Society and the Reproduction of Dravidian Hegemony in Tamil Nadu: A Gramscian Analysis

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doi.org/10.64643/IJIRTV13I4-208297-459

***Abstract*—Tamil Nadu's political framework is best interpreted as a persistent struggle over civil society, rather than a record of electoral dominance. Dravidian political leadership continues to be a normalised landscape and common knowledge. Referring to Antonio Gramsci's theory of civil society and hegemony, it is worth considering hegemony as a blend of cohesion and consent, applied in parallel in the political model and cultural spheres, and kept alive when everyday norms absorb disagreement instead of simply suppressing it. It explores how Tamil Nadu's civil society built and sustained a regional political common sense that overcame individual leaders and traces its position from three distinct civil society platforms: schools and language policy, media and associated life, and the ritual of everyday public culture. Its role is to move the study of Tamil politics beyond the electoral system.**

***Index Terms*—Gramsci, Civil Society, Hegemony, Common Sense, Tamil Nadu, Dravidian movement, Language Policy**

I. INTRODUCTION

Tamil Nadu's Political harmony since 1967 is often narrated as an electoral fact: two parties' award evolved from a single ideological moment, rotating in office for well over half a century. This paper argues that such a narration mistakes the sign for the cause. Gramsci's theory of civil society states that political leadership becomes effective only when it is organised, contested, and continuously renewed on the ground's civil society- the schools, press, cultural associations and everyday institutions of public life that a strongly state-centred or electoral account of politics tends to bracket out (Brighent, 2019). Civil society does not represent a neutral space outside politics but the very terrain on which hegemony of political power forged through the combination of coercion and consent is created, tested and periodically revised (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2025). Hegemony in the exact Gramscian sense outlined in his work combines force and consent and operates together across political, moral and cultural fields. Achieves durability precisely when everyday institutions absorb it, rather than eliminating it (Cospito, 2023). What is the way in which civil society in Tamil Nadu has constructed and sustained a Regional political common sense that has outlasted any one Dravidian leader (Sardar, 2024)? Central idea is that Gramsian hegemony is best understood as leadership exercises together with domination, not coercion by itself (Thomas, 2013). Dravidian political domination in Tamil Nadu shows that dissent is absorbed in civil society. Its function is to move the study of Tamil politics beyond electoral register- vote share, alliance arithmetic, welfare schemes towards schools, media associations, rituals of public culture through which political leadership became common sense (Dural, 2012).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent influential studies view Gramscian hegemony not as a static state but as an ongoing process. They also posit that civil society lies at the heart of how political ideas are formed, disseminated, and contested. Applying Gramsci's concepts to the South Asian context, Whitehead (2015) argues against viewing civil society and political society as rigidly separated spheres. He also stresses the ongoing

relevance of Gramscian thought for understanding resistance and social change in postcolonial contexts.
In the same spirit as Augustine and Jørgensen (2025), civil society is defined as a space of production, circulation and contestation of ideas, underlining the relation between hegemony, common sense and counter-hegemony. This research challenges a simple binary view of consent and coercion. The Gramscian hegemony is a game of political leadership and consent and coercive power. Conversely, the idea of 'passive revolution' emphasizes how the forces of domination can answer challenges through accommodation, cooptation, and institutional change. Pontarelli (2024) underlined the connection between passive revolution, hegemony and the strategic openings for subaltern movements. Taking the discussion a step further, Agarwal (2025) compared South Africa and India to show that the concept of the passive revolution remains useful in understanding fragmented political mobilization.

In the study of Tamil Nadu, considerable attention has been paid to the relationship between Dravidian politics and caste, political mobilisation, welfare schemes and cultural production. Recent studies continue to explore how Dravidian political structures shape the development of the state, caste relations, and political communication. However, these studies have developed more broadly in explaining the electoral system, welfare programs, and party politics, rather than examining civil society as a domain that continues to build hegemony.

A major trend in recent scholarship has been a focus on Dalit critiques of Dravidian politics and representation of caste in the cultural sphere. (2024) Bharathvaraj on the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK), anti-caste Tamil nationalism and the film 'Madras'. He shows how cultural productions can be a site to contest both the Dravidian political traditions and the trajectory of Dalit politics. These studies are significant in the sense that they demonstrate that Tamil cultural productions are not only instruments of reflecting hegemonic political ideologies but can also be sites of intervention and ideological struggles against hegemony.

III. RESEARCH GAP

What remains comparatively underexplored is how these dimensions interact within Tamil Nadu's civil society to reproduce, adapt and contest Dravidian hegemony. This study tackles this gap by examining education, language, media, associational life and cultural practices as interconnected sites through which Dravidian political ideas are transformed into, and challenged as, regional political common sense.

IV. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. Apply contemporary Gramscian theory on civil society and hegemony to develop a coherent analytical framework for examining regional political formations.
2. Explore the education system and language politics of Tamil Nadu as significant civil society spaces in the construction and reproduction of political common sense.
3. Examine how media ownership and political communication contribute to the reproduction and contestation of Dravidian hegemony in Tamil Nadu.
4. Analyse how cinema fan associations, cultural organisations, and caste-based associations function as sites for the reproduction and resistance of Dravidian hegemony.

V. METHODOLOGY

A. Theoretical Framework: Civil Society and the Architecture of Hegemony

Gramsci defines civil society in his Prison Notebooks as the aggregate of institutions generally considered 'private', such as schools, newspapers, religious institutions, cultural and voluntary associations, through which the leadership of a social group is organised and at the same time challenged. This is distinct from the coercive power structure of political society itself (Gramsci, 1971). Recent conceptual studies have further refined this definition in a way that makes it directly applicable to a regional context. According to Brigendi's interpretation of Gramsci's theory of civil society, civil society is not simply a place where ideological activity takes place; it is a field of struggle. It is not a static platform that remains motionless in the background while political

conflict takes place elsewhere; it is the place where competing 'worldviews' clash over which is to be accepted as common sense (Brighenti, 2019). This distinction is important for Tamil Nadu. Rather than seeing cinema, school education and everyday life merely as channels for the transmission of a pre-determined Dravidian ideology, but as sites in which the hegemony of that ideology has to be actively and constantly reestablished.

Cospito develops the concept of hegemony in the Gramscian lexicon of the Prison Notebooks. Initially understood in the narrow sense of leading political alliances, it later expanded to encompass a comprehensive 'ethical-political' dimension—signifying ethical and intellectual leadership over the entire social formation, rather than merely a tactical coordination between political forces (Cospito, 2023). It is this broader definition that is employed in this article. Understood in this light, Dravidian hegemony cannot be reduced simply to the tactical management of alliance partners and rival parties by the DMK or AIADMK; rather, it signifies something far closer to ethical and intellectual leadership over the entirety of public life in Tamil society.

This article's primary dynamic is further refined in two more sections. Thomas's study on hegemony, passive revolution, and the 'Modern Prince' posits that Gramscian hegemony endures not by openly suppressing challenges, but by managing and incorporating them into the existing system—a process known as 'passive revolution.' Consequently, even the overt adversaries of the dominant group find themselves compelled to reproduce the latter's counter-criteria (Thomas, 2013). Similarly, the concept of hegemony proposed by Gramsci and Tourel reminds us that the balance between coercion and consent within hegemony is subject to constant renegotiation; it shifts towards consent whenever possible, resorting to coercion only when consent cannot be generated (Dural, 2012). Synthesizing these perspectives, the central argument of this article is that the sole achievement of Tamil civil society has been to confine the discourse on resistance within the Dravidian ideological framework; this is not an act of suppression, but a process of internalizing and absorbing resistance.

Agustín and Jørgensen's use of Gramsci's social theory to study migration is useful for one important reason: it shows that 'hegemony' is not just a rhetorical flourish that operates on 'political, moral and cultural bases', but is a structural feature of ideology. This aspect enables us to take Gramsci's theories beyond the class-based, national contexts in which they were originally developed, i.e., to apply them effectively to contexts that Gramsci does not directly describe theoretically - such as transnational migration or the sub-national and regional politics that this paper argues for (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2025).

B. School and Language: Education as a site of "common-sense production"

Tamil Nadu's education system has functioned as a rural civil-society institution in a uniquely direct manner: even before the advent of Dravidian rule, the medium and content of schooling served as an overt arena of political contestation rather than merely a neutral technical matter. The state's opposition to compulsory Hindi instruction—culminating in the 1965 anti-Hindi agitations that helped bring the DMK to power two years later—cemented language policy as an enduring marker of regional political identity rather than a settled administrative issue (Forrester, 1966). Sumathi Ramaswamy's account of Tamil linguistic devotion reveals how this resistance rested upon a pre-existing, decades-long civil-society project—encompassing poetry, print culture, and oratory—that had already constructed Tamil as an object of quasi-religious attachment well before any political party captured state power on that basis (Ramaswamy, 1997). Schools inherited and institutionalized this bond: Tamil-medium education, the state's persistent rejection of the mandatory three-language formula, and the school-level commemoration of Dravidian founders transform the classroom into a site where regional political common sense is renewed with each successive cohort.

Repeated attempts to revise language policy in ways perceived as reintroducing the primacy of Hindi have recurred at the national level throughout Tamil Nadu's post-independence history. Analytically significant is the nature of the response: such efforts rarely encounter indifference or narrow technical

discourse; instead, they credibly reactivate a civil-society mobilization—comprising student unions, teachers' associations, and cultural organizations—that draws directly upon the vocabulary and symbols first assembled decades ago by the Self-Respect and Dravidian movements (Subramanian, 1999). In other words, dissent against the national language policy is continuously absorbed into the existing Dravidian idiom rather than generating a genuinely new, non-Dravidian political vocabulary—precisely the mechanism predicted by Thomas's account of the "passive revolution" (Thomas, 2013).

C. Media, Cinema, and Associational Life

While Tamil Nadu schools embed general knowledge through curriculum and the medium of instruction, Tamil Nadu's media and cooperative landscape embed it through emotional identity and organizational density. M.S.S. Pandian's account of M.G. Ramachandran's political career documents how fan clubs (Rasigar Mandrams)—derived from cinema—functioned simultaneously as film-fan associations and grassroots political organizations; this precisely blurs the line between "civil society" and party-political mobilization—a distinction central to Price's account of rural civil society (Pandian, 1992). These associations did not merely support a pre-existing political project; they constructed much of its organizational infrastructure at the neighbourhood level, embedding the Dravidian political identity within a seemingly apolitical, leisure-oriented form of civil society.

Andrew Wyatt's analysis of Tamil Nadu's party system extends this framework to the contemporary print and broadcast landscape, documenting how, since the 1990s, major Tamil television channels and newspapers have been largely owned or controlled by individuals linked to one or the other of the major Dravidian parties—such as the historical connection between Sun TV and the family of the DMK's Karunanidhi (Wyatt, 2010). Viewed through the lens of Gramsci's broad concept of "ethico-political" hegemony, this pattern is particularly significant because it complicates any neat distinction between "independent" civil-society media and party-political communication: the very institution that, in a traditional liberal account, ought to stand apart and hold political power to account, serves instead as a primary vehicle for constantly renewing "Dravidian common sense" within daily broadcast schedules.

D. Every day public culture and the absorption of dissent

A clear example of the absorption mechanism identified in Tamil Nadu's response to Hindutva political mobilization. Michael Bergunder's analysis of anti-Brahminism and Hindu-nationalist historical revisionism in Tamil Nadu demonstrates that where Hindu nationalist politics has advanced in the state, it has not done so by directly rejecting the Dravidian social-justice discourse—which remains politically untouchable—but by adopting and reworking the Dravidian cultural idiom from within, realigning Hindu religious identity to be compatible with, rather than opposed to, Tamil pride (Bergunder, 2004). This is a "passive revolution" precisely in the sense meant by Thomas (2013): rather than suppressing its rival, Dravidian civil society has absorbed that rival on terms largely defined by the rival's own mobilization. Bernard Bate described Tamil political discourse as a distinctive genre of performance—employing classical Tamil rhetorical conventions in mass public meetings—and further illustrated how this idiom is continuously renewed through ritualized public events; this means that even actors seeking to challenge Dravidian hegemony are compelled to speak, in effect, within its registers (Bate, 2009).

This same pattern of absorption is evident in the state's relationship with the challenge of caste-based counter-hegemony. Hugo Gorringe's account of Dalit movements in Tamil Nadu documents how the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK)—originally established as a confrontational anti-caste movement in response to the Dravidian parties' failure to protect Dalit communities from violence—was, in subsequent decades, significantly drawn into the alliance politics and electoral arena dominated by those very Dravidian parties (Gorringe, 2005). Whether this signifies an internalization of Dalit counter-hegemony or represents its only viable path to institutional power is a subject of genuine debate in the literature; however, the tendency for dissenting voices to find expression only by entering the institutional structures of the hegemonic camp corresponds to the mechanism of absorption that this

article identifies as central to the continuing nature of Dravidian hegemony.

The empirical evidence behind all this is the welfare interventions and human development outcomes that are reported in the literature on the "Dravidian Model" (Kalaiyarasan & Vijayabaskar, 2021). Give enough matter to make such absorption valid and not strictly coercive. The Dravidian fold can successfully channel dissent through civil society institutions as that political framework has delivered concrete and measurable material benefits for nearly six decades. It provides a foundation in lived material experience – not just rhetoric – for what Cospito calls "ethico-political" hegemony (Cospito, 2023).

VI. FINDINGS

The study investigates three key findings: first, civil society serves as a foundation for maintaining Dravidian hegemony. Beyond just electoral politics, welfare policies and party organization, institutions, and practices such as cinema, education, associations, media and public cultural activities have contributed to the ongoing propagation and generalization of Dravidian political principles.

Second, language and education remain constant platforms of common-sense cultivation and debate about politics. The continuation of linguistic politics in Tamil Nadu shows that political ideas connected to a language are not confined to a specific historical period but can be reproduced and revived through social and educational institutions when people are politically challenged.

Third, the link between the media and political power challenges the traditional dichotomy between civil and political society. The relationship between media institutions and political networks shows that media spaces can simultaneously serve as public opinion forums and as channels of biased political communication. The Tamil Nadu case illustrates that civil society is not something external to political power, but a terrain of struggle in which hegemonic ideas are reproduced, negotiated and can be contested.

VII. CONCLUSION

This paper has contended that an analysis of the political longevity of Tamil Nadu based solely on electoral or welfare considerations falls short of the explanation offered by Gramsci's theory of civil society. The paper argues that, by combining recent conceptual work on hegemony as leadership and domination with an existing literature on Tamil Nadu's education, media, and public culture, Dravidian hegemony reproduces itself not through the suppression of alternatives but, more specifically, through the absorption of dissent into its own institutional and rhetorical terms. This explanation is meant to supplement, not replace, existing accounts that focus on welfare provision and populist mediation by identifying the civil society mechanism through which these material achievements are constantly converted into permanent political common sense. Future research might usefully test whether the same absorption mechanism operates as reliably in Tamil Nadu's more recent digital and social-media civil society as it has in cinema, print and broadcast media across the twentieth century, ideally with fieldwork and media-ownership data that this paper's desk-based method could not draw on.

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